

# HALE'S MAGAZINE.

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## THE FINGER OF GOD.

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**T**he boom of the shining brass cannon that stood in front of the prison office at San Quentin warned the inside and outside guards, and all the people for a league thereabout, that a convict had escaped. Children loitering homeward from school stopped, looked apprehensively at the summit of the ridge intervening between them and the prison walls, huddled closer, and then quickly sought the safety of their homes. Many a horse jogging along the neighboring highways heard a hurrying chirrup and felt the smart touch of a whip as his driver sent the impulse of the cannonshot into his laggard legs. For not only might a hunted and desperate man at large invade all personal rights in the pursuit of his safety, but soon would come eager men on horse and afoot, and likely the singing of rifle balls in the air.

Janet, the nurse of little Elaine, the prison warden's daughter, was one whose face paled and lips parted as the heavy boom of the gun struck her heart. She, better than the people of the countryside, realized the dangers of the moment; for over and over, day after day, the warden had cautioned her; again and again had she heard terrible

accounts of these savage men, who when it came to a fight for their freedom, gave the value of human life no place in their reckoning; and more than once she had heard the boom of the cannon, seen eager men hunting their game to quarry, and listened with a still heart to the singing of rifle-balls in the air.

These two, Janet and little Elaine, had been spending a happy afternoon in the hills overlooking the great prison—all the happier that it had been so peaceful and quiet. Gentle as little Elaine always was, it seemed to Janet that never had the frail child been so lacking in manifestations of infantile animal life, so spiritual, so dainty, so exquisitely touched by what poor ignorant Janet whispered to herself was the Finger of God. For all that, it was clear that little Elaine was happy. The content that filled her young heart shone like a radiance in her wan face and her wide, patient blue eyes, and at times came forth tangible in a rare smile, which, instead of dimpling her cheeks, lent them strange, bright wrinkles. So genuine was her happiness that she had even neglected the customary primness of her hair, which, having lost its encompassing ribbon, had gone wild about her head in childish abandon, its amber

*THE FINGER OF GOD.*

sheen glowing like the light which ushers the rising sun. Not once during the whole shining afternoon had the watchful eyes of Janet seen in the patient face of her charge that familiar dumb picture of pain which the deformed back of the child had so often painted there.

Little Elaine had heard the boom of the cannon, and understood its meaning. Even before Janet had recovered from the fear that stilled her heart the child was struggling unaided to her feet. "We must go quickly, dear," said Janet, catching up the child's hat from the ground, while Elaine's thin fingers were bringing the wild amber sunbeams under ribboned subjection.

Elaine said not a word, and gave no sign of fear. She could walk very well, though slowly—too slowly for the terrified nurse, who unceremoniously seized the child in her arms for hasty flight down the hill-slope and through the stunted oaks to the warden's home outside the prison wall.

"Put me down, Janet!" she peremptorily demanded with the imperiousness of childhood. "I want to walk." In an instant Elaine had wriggled from her nurse's embrace and was standing defiantly before her. Her keen sense of the indignity that had been thrust upon her lent such an unwonted color to her cheeks, and such an uncanny rebuke to her eyes, staring now so widely at Janet, that the girl was dismayed. The impulse, born of the agonizing fear which beset her, to seize the child and bear her to safety, wavered before the stern and unearthly expression of the child's face; and then, before she could shape her conduct, Elaine started down the hill with deliberate steps, remarking to the world at large:

If you wish to go home with me, you may do so. I am not afraid. He will not hurt us."

The delay had been fatal; for He, panting with the exertion of his flight and with the lust of freedom, bounded up the slope and came to a halt before them. Knowing the instinct of the feminine throat in an extremity, and observing that its functions in Janet's case would give themselves instant exercise, the outlaw made a dash for her, closed his powerful fingers about her neck, and flung her unconscious to the ground. Then his gigantic form and menacing eyes faced Elaine.

They recognized each other at once. Still, and silent, and white, with a terrific awe enfolding her spirit, she gazed upward into the face of the most turbulent and dangerous of all the social flotsam that had drifted into her father's keeping. She knew him for his masterful size, his wild, hungry fanged glance, and his voice like a bull's. She knew him for his prison record, with its alternate outbursts of rage and sufferings of punishment; its blasphemies and violence; its assaults; its hatred of the authorities; its dreary weeks in the dungeon. She knew him for the man who had chiseled an oath into the stone face of the prison that he would kill her father. She knew him for the one human being who had had an unkind word for her, and that was when he cursed her one day and called her the warden's brat, and told her that she was a hunchback.

It was only for a moment that the giant and the cripple faced each other, but all those memories, and more rioted in the child's recollection, while her sharp ears caught the faint sounds of







hurried preparations for the chase, far down through the stunted oaks. The swift galloping of horses, the shouted commands of officers, the faint rattle of metal—nothing was lost.

The momentary spell was broken by her small musical voice.

"Tom," she said, "you can't get away; they will catch you." Ah, had she only not spoken!

"Bah!" growled the convict, shaking off the paralysis that had momentarily overtaken him.

"The warden's brat—the hunchback?" His hoarse voice was choked with infinite hatred. Whatever murderous intention might have warmed his blood for an instant it were idle to imagine; for at once there flashed through his moiling brain a splendid plan of safety. "You will be my shield, my bodyguard, you twisted spawn!" With that he caught her up in his arms. "The bullet that finds me will first let daylight through you!" He dashed over the hill bearing her securely.

It was a wild flight: Down the further side of the hill the convict fled, across a dangerously open ravine, and up the contiguous slope, avoiding the roads, keeping always a wholly unfrequented route, and heading for the mountains, some miles away. Nothing cared he for the strong tree branches that tore the child's clothing, snatched off her hat, and started the blood in scratches from her skin. Once or twice her flowing hair, freed from its restraining ribbon caught in the trees, but with an oath he wrenched off the limb and plunged onward, laboring, panting, never ceasing his firm hold upon her, never staying his flight except for a moment now and then as he would gain an eminence

and sweep the country in search of his pursuers. The load that he bore was small and light and it meant nothing to his superb strength. Across a shoulder and held in one arm he bore her, the other arm free to open a way through the brush and trees, now steadily growing more and more a stubborn hinderance to his progress, and more and more a torture to the living shield that he bore.

Hours had passed, and no pursuers had been seen. All through this wild flight little Elaine, though scratched by the branches till she bled, and though suffering agonies from the straining of her back, said not a word and made not a moan.

After many miles of this arduous exertion the convict began to slacken his pace. They were now well on toward temporary security in the mountains, and night was close at hand. From struggling over every foot of the ground the convict fell into a walk. The morsel on his shoulder could feel the giant chest heave painfully, and she knew by the unsteady swaying of his body that the strength of his legs had come nearly to an end. As the tension of the flight relaxed, his exertions slackened, and then she knew by his eager searching around that he was consumed with thirst.

Staggering on, the man at last found a gulch, which, though dry, gave promise of water in its higher reaches. Twilight had now come, and it imperceptibly merged into moonlight as he labored heavily up the canyon. A welcome trail made by cattle relieved the severer hardships of his progress, and this and the growing night gave him greater ease of mind. It seemed to occur to him suddenly that the burden on his

shoulder was a living thing and that it had been strangely limp and quiet. With some haste he drew her down and peered into her wide-open eyes. To his gratification he found her not only alive, but conscious.

"Hullo," he gruffly cried. "Been asleep? This has been a great lark, eh? Never had anybody to carry you so far?"

Well, well! that isn't bad and you've stood it like a brick!"

The tone and manner of the man were so different from their first expression that they sent a small thrill of comfort into the numb heart and aching body of the child.

"Oh," she exclaimed, with an approach to cheerfulness, "I didn't mind it much!"

"You didn't!" echoed the astonished man. He was so bewildered that all he could say was, "Well, well, well!" Then with something of tenderness he adjusted her more comfortably in both his arms, and thus slowly proceeded up the canyon.

The change seemed to give her great relief, for she nestled her head against his shoulder and sighed in satisfaction. This bewildered the fugitive the more; and although a vicious thirst was gnawing him and sharp cramps stung the overstrained muscles of his legs, he felt a strange pleasure in pressing the soft, frail little form closer to his chest, and feeling its warmth there, and the sweet childish breath that swept his neck. He muttered unintelligibly to himself about it all, and then, after saying, "Well, well!" a great many times, he reached the climax in one hearty exclamation—"I'll be hanged!"

He found the water at last, and so eager was he for it that he half dropped

the child in putting her down, and was in the act of throwing himself upon the ground to drink, when he suddenly checked himself, glanced at the little heap lying so still, and said:

"Well! hang me if I hadn't almost forgotten the little one. Don't you want a drink?"

"Yes," came the gentle answer from a very dry throat, but there was a smile in it.

"Of course the little one wants a drink. Come! can you lie down flat and drink?"

She tried, but when she moved she caught her breath in pain, for the ailing back had been sorely tried in the rough flight.

"It hurts, Little One?"—and yet she had tried hard not to let him see that it did. "Well, well! now, you lie still, and I'll make you a cup."

With that he dexterously shaped a cup from a leaf, rinsed it carefully, filled it, and placed it to her lips. She drank with a dainty eagerness, and her wide eyes asked for more; which the outlaw gave to her, and then another, and another, as her eyes asked for more, until the fugitive began to exhibit alarm.

"Little One!" he cried, "where in thunder are you putting all that water? Why, you must have been dying for it, and you never said a word and I never thought of it!"

She smiled amusedly at him, and the wrinkling of her face as she did so, brought a strange look into his. He gazed at her so steadily that she became uneasy and reminded him that he had not drunk.

"Oh, bless my soul, I had forgotten all about it!"

Thereupon he flung himself down and



drank so long, and eagerly, and deeply that a thin childish voice cried in mock alarm:

"Tom! where in thunder are you putting all that water?"

He straightened up instantly, and as soon as he could get his breath his mighty chest and wide throat gave issue to a hearty laugh that rang up and down through the canyon as never laughter had done in that wilderness before.

But there were graver things to consider—among them the danger of the vast laugh that had gone ringing up and down through the canyon; for the man knew with his every thinking faculty that the pursuit of him, since he had stolen the child, would be relentless and desperate, and that his hunters would count their lives as nothing so long as he retained possession of her. Confused plans raced through his turbulent brain. Now that the immediate danger of attack was past, he no longer had need of her, and it had been his plan to abandon her when night should come so that he might continue his flight unhampered and under cover of darkness. But now he seemed to have forgotten that—at

least, he thought it might be just as well to find shelter for her, as the night was growing cold and the child was dressed for a summer day. It was out of the question to make a fire to warm her. He took her hands. They felt so cold, and thin, and soft in his great hot palms that the softness, and smallness, and coldness of them seemed to hurt him in

some way that he could not understand. He roused himself out of that.

"I'm terribly hungry, Little One," he said.

"Are you? And you have nothing to eat. I am very sorry."

He looked down at her quickly as she still lay on the ground.

"You must be hungry too, Little One," he said.

"Oh, I don't mind that!" she protested.

That dazed him. He gazed at her a full minute in silent astonishment, and then, speaking low to himself, half reverently, he said:

"Well, well—I'll be hanged!"

A certain indefinable wretchedness, a certain aching that he could in no way understand, weighed upon his breast. All his strained mental alertness, all the capabilities of his tremendous muscles, fell into awkwardness and he



floundered miserably.

"Do you feel the cold, Little One?" he asked foolishly.

"Oh, not much!"

"Get up and run about; that will warm you."

Her small face wrinkled into a smile at this gruff but thoughtful command, and she tried to obey, but sank again.

"Let me help you," he said, lifting her gingerly to her feet, as though he feared that she would break under his rough touch. But her thin face betrayed the pain that she suffered, and her legs seemed incapable; so she sank to the ground. Then a strange, wild look of alarm entered her face.

"Tom!" she called in unspeakable fear, looking up as he bent over her. "Tom!"

"I won't hurt you, Little One."

"I know, I know, but where are my legs, Tom?"

"Why, here they are, Little One—don't you see?"

She put out her hand with a strange hesitation, felt them, pinched them, and then, with added terror, she said sobbing:

"Those are not mine, Tom! I don't feel them. It doesn't hurt to pinch them. I can't feel anything there, and just now, when I tried to stand they were gone, Tom!"

Thus was the brave little spirit broken at last, and the hulking giant, who understood it all, lurched back upon his feet, and gazed speechless down upon the wreck that he had made, lying before him sobbing, her eyes all terror-filled, and her thin arms held out beseechingly toward him. And then the weight that he had felt in his chest, and the strange pain that had gnawed him there, became the one a mountain and

the other a tiger, smothering and devouring the wildness in him, the desperation, the splendid ferocity. With infinite awkwardness, which his tenderness concealed, he seated himself beside her, took off his convict's coat, wrapped her snugly in it, smoothed back her wild hair and placed his convict's cap upon her head and drew it down over her ears, took her gently in his arms, and held her snugly and comfortably there. No word had he spoken, for his power of speech was choked back within him. The thin little face lay upon his shoulder close to his cheek.

The giant holding her thus, and saying nothing, swayed his body to and fro, as a mother might, and gradually the Little One's sobbing ceased, and he thought she had gone to sleep; but presently she shrank a little and quietly said:

"Tom, you will get wet out here."

"How, Little One?"—but his voice was thick.

"From the rain. I felt some drops on my cheek. They were hot."

The convict made no reply, but he drew her closer and held his head further back.

After a time he knew that she had gone to sleep. Then the mysteries of the night, the wonderful silence of the moon, the dangers that hunted him, the gently heaving morsel that he held in his arms, all these worked unceasingly upon him, bewildering him, deadening him, filling him with strange and unaccountable agonies. Hardly did he realize that he should have been many miles away, that every moment was bringing nearer to him those terrible hounds of the law that no doubt must be finding his trail



as often as they lost it, and, aided by the telegraph, were drawing in upon him from many directions. Numbly he pictured them in his imagination as they picked their way in the darkness, silently, eagerly, with unfailing alertness, and with rifles always cocked and ready for instant use. And back of all that he saw the huddled form of a woman lying where his good strong hands had tossed her, and a strange, small, white vision of calm and unterrified dignity standing before him as though it were the warning Finger of God.

Toward morning the Little One stirred. He soothed her into slumber again, but presently he looked down into her face, and in the gray light of morning he beheld her wide blue eyes looking calmly up into the sky.

"Are you ready to go now, Little One?" he asked.

She sighed wearily and answered, "Yes." One awful question he had not the courage to ask, one awful test he had not the courage to make—he would not let her feet touch the ground. He gave her some water, and still holding her gently in both arms, and keeping her wrapped in his convict's coat, strode rapidly down the canyon, though escape lay the other way.

"You shall have something to eat very soon, Little One," he said, "and a good place to rest."

He swung along at a free gait, quite different from the crouching, stealthy, hunted flight of the day before. With his head thrown back he faced the daylight and the open world, and instead of the wild and desperate ferocity which the child had seen before in his face, was the calmness of serene and satisfied manhood.

Presently he turned out of the canyon into a trail for which he had been evidently searching, ascended the slope, found a road, and followed it openly and unafraid. Before long he arrived at a rude cabin and there found a few rough men preparing their breakfast. He entered without ceremony.

The men were speechless, but the convict paid no attention to their surprise.

"Are you woodchoppers?"

One of them stammered an affirmative answer.

"Well," said the fugitive, "that means that you are honest men. You see what I am. There is no sense in standing there like fools—I won't eat you. Give me something for the Little One to eat. Do you hear? That bread, that milk—hurry, you fools!" But not waiting for their dazed obedience, he seated himself at their table, propped the child up against his left arm, and brought the food to her lips. She began to eat ravenously, but the convict interrupted:

"Slow, Little One, slow—there is time. Here—try a little of this coffee; it is good and warm, and woodchoppers have honest victuals."

"But, Tom," she protested, "you are hungrier than I am. You eat first."

He looked around the men in a bewildered, foolish way, glancing at each in turn as they stood awkwardly looking on, and there was a certain air of pride and triumph in his manner, as though it meant to say, "Did you ever see anything like that?" But they were so astonished at the spectacle of a man in convict dress—evidently an escape—huge, savage, bareheaded, having in charge so small and dainty and elegant a little morsel of childhood, and tending and feeding her as if that were the one



thing in life remaining for him to do, instead of thinking first that they were his possible captors, eager for the price that would surely be set upon his head, that they could only stand and wonder in stupid silence.

The hunger of the fugitive and his charge was satisfied at last, and when the Little One thanked the choppers the convict declared in astonishment that he would be hanged.

"Why, Little One," he declared, "these men are proud to do that for you!" And they promptly said that they were.

The convict then put the Little One to bed in one of the bunks of the cabin, sat down beside her, and without giving any further heed to the men, said reassuringly:

"You will soon be home again."

She started, and a quick bright flush came into her pallid cheeks; then she smiled as she looked gratefully at him, extended a small hand to be grasped by his, settled herself comfortably, closed her eyes, and soon was asleep.

The convict gently released the child's hand, rose, and wearily stretched his prodigious frame. Up to this time he had paid no attention to the men. He had not observed that one by one they had quietly slipped outside, but he seemed to feel no apprehension when he discovered on tiptoeing to the door and looking out that they had all disappeared.

A quick glance backward into the cabin revealed the evil glint of a rifle that leaned against the wall. It fascinated the man. Though he had been made of iron, his pose could not have been more rigid as he stood while the shimmer of the rifle found its way into

the ultimate depths of his nature and kindled life and stimulation there.

He walked back as one in a trance, looking neither to right nor left; picked up the weapon, examined it critically, found that it was in perfect order and of large caliber, and that its magazine was full, laid it across his arm, and with a trance-like stride stepped out of the cabin into the open. A shot, which brought a biting sting in his neck, put him instantly in command of all his faculties.

The cabin stood upon a bald mountain and many yards below was the breast of the forest. It was a laboring distance for a rifle to carry true, and likely the bullet that found the convict's neck had had the help of chance. Only from that direction could the attack be made, as back of the cabin the mountain was naked to the crown.

The convict, watchfully scanning the forest front for a mark, held his rifle poised. The gray convict color had returned to his face, and with it all the hardness and sullen determination of a man making a final stand for his freedom or his life. But was it so? Wherefore stood he out in the open, when the cabin walls might have given him so secure protection? What had become of his purpose to use the Little One as a shield against which a rifle could not even be aimed? No matter. It was a thing of his own doing, the action of a man under a joyous inspiration of the knowledge that he was free—free to live or die in the manner that his soul should choose. Behind the dark forest rampart there might be a dozen, a score, a hundred men with shining eyes at that moment ranging rifle-sights upon his breast; at any instant, from the wide arc that



stretched before him, might come an overwhelming charge of men mounted and afoot to riddle him at closer quarters. But there he stood alone, massive, calm, defiant, his eyes blazing with the madness of hate, his gray face drawn with the passion to kill. And not the slightest heed did he give to the stinging in his neck or the blood that trickled down and saturated the convict's shirt on his breast.

A puff of smoke issued from the edge of the forest. The bullet went astray, but instantly the convict had sent an answering one. Then the arc gave forth a long scattered line of men. They ran rapidly up the slope, and when the convict's rifle came again to bear—this time upon the leader, who was the warden himself—every man fell flat, and the convict reserved his fire. Thus he stood with his rifle poised, ready to shoot the first man who rose; but they were too wily for that. Then he beheld an extraordinary scene. The pursuers, instead of coming to their feet and charging, began to crawl upon their bellies up the mountain-side. Thus in deathly silence approached the wriggling line, made of small black dots upon the ground.

The convict was bewildered. The slowness of the advance, the deadly and implacable purpose of it, and its awful silence weighed cold and heavy upon his spirit. If they would only come on like men, with shouts and the cracking of rifles, how gloriously he could fight, how bravely he could die! But the line crept on with the slow fatality of the rising tide. Its every inch of progress shortened the range, and the very position of the men on the ground would lend a deadly effectiveness to their aim.

But they were wasting no shots now.

The convict fired at one of the black spots, and saw the dust that his bullet raised near it; but worse than that, he saw the line spring to its feet, dash forward, and sink the moment he had thrown the lever and was ready for another shot.

The line crept steadily on. Then an ominous stillness fell upon it, and a volley rang out from end to end. The convict fell, and the line dashed onward. He arose to a sitting posture, then to his knees, and the line dropped again.

At this juncture there appeared in the doorway of the cabin, within sight of all the men, and in range behind the convict, a tiny morsel of humanity, known in certain quarters as the Little One. The door-facing and the cabin walls to her right and left showed the rips and tears of rifle-balls. Though the hunters could not see at that distance the terror in her wide eyes and the deepened pallor of her cheeks, they did behold, and some of them recognized, the thick crown of fair hair to which the early sun had lent a richer amber glow.

"Tom!" she called.

That struck him harder and cut deeper than the stinging bite in his neck and the vicious leg-snip that had cut him down. He flung the rifle aside, rose to his feet, and, a great light driving the black iron from his face, he cried exultantly:

"Why, Little One, you've found your legs!" And then she ran to him, and he caught her up in his arms.

There are said to be those living to-day who declare that in their opinion the convict threw away his rifle and snatched up the child as the better protection of his life. But—well upon one



point there is no variance of opinion, promised him again and again, in response to his pleadings, while she nestled in her father's arms, that she would visit him in the prison every day.

## GOD'S MYSTERY.

Into my heart there came a harbinger of spring;  
 A something vague, and undefined  
 As that strange change which comes in one night's dark,  
 And when the daylight falls, we say, "The spring is here!"  
 Frozen and cold my heart pulsed wearily,  
 Like mountain torrent 'cased in icy fold;  
 Which held its joy and song within itself,  
 Nor thought 'twould e'er again find utterance.  
 But lo! A warm, encircling, penetrating light,  
 Like sun of spring to snow enshrouded fount,  
 Came close and closer yet, from out life's void,  
 And wrought God's Mystery!  
 The icy band which seals the streamlets flow,  
 Makes music as it slowly melts away,  
 So does the frost-cold casing 'round my heart,  
 Yield to the warmth of love most gratefully.  
 No more the song and joy will be confined;  
 No more will be the pent up ecstasy!  
 Like rippling flow of waters long repressed,  
 My heart sings joyously, "Love, Love is here!"

—ALICE HARRIMAN.

